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ABSTRACT

Exclusion from mainstream American culture and perceptions of marginality drive some youth to create their own subgroups. As cultural elements of the subgroups reach further from what most Americans deem "acceptable," the alienation of these youth is intensified. Community agencies can use an ecological perspective to work for changes that will improve the outlook for alienated youth at risk of social abandonment. The perspective encourages the view that since young people are influenced by so many institutions, these institutions are in the best position to mobilize the community in ways that will benefit the diverse emotional, social, and physical needs of these youth. These mobilization efforts include the following: (1) organizing citizens to take a stand for their rights; (2) encouraging community members to take leadership roles; (3) establishing a community vision of changes that should take place; (4) declaring publicly what can be done by individuals and what needs a collaborative effort; (5) encouraging and recognizing those who have contributed to the community; (6) spreading a feeling of ownership; (7) developing positive human relationships; and (8) making sure the efforts for change are sustained. Four examples of successful school community collaborations are given. A list of three references and profiles of the authors are included. (VM)

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MOBILIZING LOCAL COALITIONS AND COLLABORATIONS TO BETTER SERVE CHILDREN AT RISK

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Introduction

In early America, each village contained a community school where children could learn and citizens could meet. Often this one building served as a school, church, court and social hall. This building became the shared focus of a community's sense of itself. It became more than a physical place. It became a symbol of the interpersonal, caring links among individuals. It was emotionally and physically the center of the community. Here, individual problems became the community's concern whether citizens were gathered for religious purposes, educational endeavors, social occasions, to witness a court case, or to debate issues at a "town meeting." As the community's center, it provided everyone with a source of strength, i.e., individual citizens began to rely on the greater power of the collective community in times of need. This support gave an individual more power. Along with that power, however, social behaviors also tended to become somewhat constrained and focused on social goals which had been, to some extent, negotiated by the whole.

This phenomena occurred with successful results when communities were far more homogeneous than they are today. In early America, communities tended to be composed of individuals with similar values and beliefs. When serious differences arose that could not be resolved by the collective group, one of the parties would simply strike out in a new direction and establish a new community. For example, when Roger Williams had differences with the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he was invited to leave. He established Rhode Island and led his followers, the new community, according to his values and beliefs.

Today, it is nearly impossible to physically strike out in a new direction and establish a new community. But what has happened over the years in America is somewhat analogous. Economic and cultural differences have led, or forced, some groups out into new "territories" away from the mainstream to find new communities or subgroups within a larger community. Often what drives people out is a forcible exclusion from "mainstream" American culture or a perception of "marginality." For example, after forcibly being excluded from full participation in American civic life for more than three hundred years, Black Americans have built a rich culture. Many elements of this culture are very different from those found in "mainstream" American culture. Another example of this phenomena has resulted from society's inability to provide positive role models of success for low-income youth. In reaction to this perception of marginality and a feeling of being an outsider, they have built and rebuilt a "youth culture" very different from that of their parents. Indeed, in America today it may be pointless to try to define a "mainstream" culture.

Communities, if the term is to have any meaning, are not cities and towns, but are instead groupings of individuals bonded through common understandings about what is important and what work needs to be completed together towards those goals.

In addition to this increased cultural diversification, America has seen a bureaucratization of its social life. Communities today are larger and their problems have become more complex. Much of our social behavior has become formalized with the growth of public and private social services agencies and their rules and regulations. In many communities, it is difficult to keep track of the number of agencies developing or implementing regulations that impact on children.

On another level, however, social norms and expectations are not that complex. Children progress through the many levels of our school system. They do not quite understand that elementary schools and high schools are different institutions with different leadership and different goals. They simply perceive that they are going to school and that the system is integrated. From this perspective, they see no differences between community institutions. They presume that our institutions work together. Little League games take place on the school playground so Little League must somehow be related to the school.

In many ways, all of our community institutions are connected. Harold Hodgkinson, in his demographic study of education titled *All One System*, pointed out that changes at one level of the system will soon have an impact an another.

Our social world is an ecosystem. Urie Bronfenbrenner (*The Ecology of Human Development*, 1979) has been especially influential in promoting an ecological perspective on human development which can be used to better understand how our children develop in our rather complex social world. Seen from this perspective, children are a part of and are influenced by many institutions. These include but are not limited to family, racial and ethnic communities, religious organizations, school, health and social service agencies, parents' workplaces, employers, the city and state in which they live, etc.

All of these agencies and institutions are in turn connected to the others. What happens in one part of the social system affects many or all of the other parts of the system. This concept needs to be emphasized as we look to strengthen the power of these institutions through collaborative efforts to better serve youth.

In summary, it can be argued that today's social institutions are both disconnected and connected. On the *functional* level, they are disconnected. Often, one agency has little contact with another. On the *effective* level, however, the system is very much connected. The effects of an action by an institution such as the school are felt throughout the system. It then becomes critical to use these connections to better improve education of at-risk youth. All the agencies have a role to play. If each becomes involved in the efforts, the power of the initiative is greatly enhanced.

Applying These Concepts

Strategies to improve the education of "at-risk" children are most likely to work if they reflect an understanding of this ecological perspective and how it impacts on a child's life. This is commonly referred to as a "community-centered" approach. The focus must be on the individual child *and* his or her diverse developmental needs as the center of planning, implementation and evaluation. These needs include cognitive development and academic learning (the focus of the school) but cannot be separated from other aspects of development such as mental, emotional, and physical health; social competence; moral or religious values; citizenship; and the ability to earn a living.

One of the key ingredients of school reform, a sense of community, or sharing certain beliefs and values with other institutions is maintained through the adoption of this ecological perspective (working collaboratively) to better serve our at-risk youth. David S. Seeley, in his book Education Through Partnership, proposes a conception of educational reform in which education is the shared responsibility of families, students, schools, and other elements of the community. In this way, education moves away from the "delegation of responsibility" model in favor of the kind of face-to-face, one-on-one relationships upon which all teaching and learning is based. These concepts are demonstrated in the following examples of successful community collaborations and school reforms aimed at aiding at-risk children.

Example 1

In 1986 and 1987, school districts and church leaders in Oakland and San Diego promoted a community-wide program to make the community aware that parents are the child's first and most important teachers. The challenge was to translate that message into specific actions parents could undertake.

In 1986, with support from the California State Department of Education, Oakland Unified School District sponsored a program called "Education Sunday." On a single Sunday in March, more than 100 school board members, school administrators, and teachers attended

church services around the city and were given an opportunity to make a presentation about schools and the ways parents can help their children learn. Parents, grandparents, and others in the congregation were then asked to sign a pledge promising to complete specific actions to help children learn. Although Education Sunday was strictly a voluntary program for everyone involved, the efforts produced almost 25,000 pledges. The following year in San Diego, clergy approached the school district with the Oakland Program in the hope of replicating Education Sunday in their community. Together, the school district and church groups sponsored three Education Sundays in different sections of the city.

As in Oakland, the program emphasized voluntary participation. The pledges were made available in both English and Spanish and were printed twice on a single sheet of paper. Parents were asked to sign both copies. One was returned to the church and the second copy was kept on a refrigerator, desk or a place at home as a reminder.

The San Diego project was broad-based. A Parent Involvement Steering Committee was begun which soon grew to include representatives of the district's central office, the PTA, several ministerial alliances, the Urban League, and the district's Mexican-American Advisory Committee. Building on the heightened awareness of parent involvement, the projects also designed follow-up activities where parent and community volunteers could assist students in a variety of ways. The activities were held in churches, schools and community centers.

Example 2

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) has developed a model program for high schools to help pregnant and parenting students stay in school. It is now being piloted in Bay View High School in Milwaukee and Bladensburg High School in Prince George's County, Maryland. The model's key feature is the presence of a counselor/advocate in the school. This counselor/advocate identifies students in need of help and enrolls them in the program. She establishes case-management files for each student and, working through a multi-agency "problem-solving group," coordinates each student's academic progress and health, counseling, employment, and social services.

The role of the counselor/advocate as an individual, not strictly speaking employed by the school, has been important but problematic. Her independence enables her to serve as a personal counselor interested in students' complex situations but unhindered by institutional allegiance. As with many programs of this type, however, this sort of "neither-fish-nor-fowl" position raises a host of questions about the appropriateness of activities, certification, liability, and the like.

In Milwaukee, a subcommittee of the city's pre-existing Critical Health Problem Curriculum Advisory Committee served as a problem-solving group. Mandated members of this committee include representatives of the school district central office, the Milwaukee Health Department, the teachers and administrators' unions, and the Mental Health Planning Council. The subcommittee on adolescent pregnancy and parenting was chaired by a representative of Planned Parenthood of Milwaukee and included representatives of many other public and private social service agencies.

In Prince George's County, the problem-solving group was jointly chaired by the Supervisor of Health Services from the public schools and the Director of Child Health Services from the county health department. In the second year of the project, the group merged with the County Executive's Commission for Children and Youth. The group includes representatives

from the public schools (guidance, home economics, and health departments), the department of social services, the health department, the county hospital, and juvenile services.

The "problem-solving group" strategy reinforces the "team approach" to serving pregnant and parenting teens. It also provides a vehicle for evaluating the range of services offered by the community.

Example 3

Five children's service organizations and the Boston public schools have joined forces to provide in-school counseling and mental health services in five elementary schools. Working directly with teachers to identify specific children, the consortium provides psychological assessments, evaluations, and individual, group, and family therapy.

Funded with $195,000 by the schools, the United Way, and two foundations, the five agencies worked with 182 children in 1987-1988 through two full-time and five part-time social workers, a part-time psychologist, and five part-time coordinators and support staff.

The most frequently treated problems include acting out behavior, peer adjustment issues, academic performance, shy/withdrawn behavior, family relations, transfer/school adjustment, depression, and delayed development.

The five agencies have successful histories of effective child welfare services by bringing together a unique combination of experience and expertise. Not only do they offer a direct service to individual children within the schools, but they provide an informal source of reference and information for the teachers in those schools.

By connecting the public schools with Boston Children's Service Association, Family Service Association of Greater Boston, New England Home for Little Wanderers, Roxbury Children's Service, and diverse funding, the ownership of the solutions to these problems is broadened to a more fully participating community. Children with these problems and needs come to be seen as "our" (the community's) concern, not just the school's.

Example 4

As a result of a $100,000 grant from the Rice Foundation, and a substantial gift of computers from Apple Computers, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Chicago have opened a state-of-the-art computer lab in its Eisenberg unit. Located in Alba Houses, a deteriorating housing project on the near-west side of the Chicago Loop, the Eisenberg unit is surrounded by conditions which are bleak at best. The public high school dropout rate is between 50 and 75 percent.

Passing through the entrance to the Club's computer center, however, is akin to walking through a magic door transporting children from an environment of limited opportunities to a milieu more characteristic of a high-tech, downtown Chicago office building. It is extraordinarily bright and clean, with custom-designed computer stations, colorful displays, and an exciting ambiance practically screaming that the Center is a place to learn and to have fun.

The Rice Computer Center is designed to provide hands-on computer education for the 15,000 members of all 13 inner-city Boys and Girls Clubs. Children are bused to the Center. At their home units, they may use computer terminals connected to the Rice Center. The Rice Center enjoys the full-time skilled leadership of individuals with Ph.D. and Masters level training as well as practical, inner-city experience; and consultation from nationally recognized experts from the School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Immediately across the parking lot from the Eisenberg unit is Chicago's Jacob Riss Elementary School. The school received a $26,000 grant from the state which enables principals to gain resources for community-oriented programs. With these funds, the school is training its teachers to be computer literate. In addition, the school is able to work with the Boys and Girls Club leadership to develop the components of an electronic study hall. Teachers assign work which can be completed in the electronic study hall at the Rice Computer Center. Boys and Girls Club staff, assisted by parents and older children, provide tutoring and assistance to Riss students after school and on Saturdays.

What Is Needed?

From these examples and other similar efforts, we can identify a pattern of necessary elements to guide others seeking to mobilize the community:

1. *Citizens have taken a stand, saying, "We want something different. We will no longer tolerate what we have and we will work to realize these new expectations."* This is diametrically opposed to the "blaming the victim" perspective that underlies many debates on social problems today. Most social interventions today are developed from a "deficit" model that seeks to identify shortcomings in individuals or families and then attempts to remediate those shortcomings.

   Instead of focusing on what's wrong with at-risk children and families, these successful programs have adopted Pogo's philosophy: "We have met the enemy and they are us." These programs seek to identify and build on strengths rather than focus on weaknesses.

2. *Leadership has emerged to guide the project and to inspire others.* The leadership may be formal or ad hoc, but someone (an individual or a group) must emerge as the galvanizing leader/friend who can bridge the gaps between disparate groups and find the elements of consensus which bond people together to address this issue.

3. *There is a common community vision of what should happen.* By establishing this new vision, the community transcends old differences and uses their considerable group energy to realize these goals.

4. *While common goals may be held by all, the people involved in successful projects recognize that the means to achieve their goals will vary considerably.* One way to build on this reality is to encourage individuals and groups to publicly declare what they can do individually and cooperatively. Those pledges of contributions can be displayed to the community and routinely reported. Progress toward these pledges must also be measured and evaluated regularly.

5. *Those who have made contributions towards the common goal need to be encouraged and recognized.* Successes need to be publicized so people feel good about what they have done.

   Successful collaborative projects develop specific goals to reduce the impact of at-risk situations. For example, communities commit themselves to realistic goals such as increasing school attendance by 10%, or reducing the dropout rate by 20%.

6. *Leadership builds upon strengths, encourages progress and finds strategies to overcome real or perceived roadblocks, but leadership itself cannot become the focus of the effort.* The project cannot be "owned" by the leadership or other community members won't be interested in participating. As each group does their part, they "buy in" as owners of community solutions.

7. *Human, rather than institutional, relationships are the building blocks of real progress.* Andrew Hahn's challenging new book *Dropouts in America: Enough Is Known For Action* calls for individual advocates for individual at-risk children. David Seeley's *Education Through Partnership* calls for the development of face-to-face accountability as the basis for educational reform. In the early days of America, individuals were not lost in the crowd. People were recognized as individuals and their strengths and limitations; their successes and their foibles were all known. Because collective effort provided a common meeting ground, these communities could address individual needs and help people succeed.

   Collaborations are an effective return to that historical model. Individuals need to look out for others and help the system respond to them.

8. *Successful collaborative projects recognize that we didn't get to our current situation in the last few days and we certainly won't get out of it tomorrow.* The gradual increase in the numbers of at-risk children has occurred over a long period of time and it will take communities a long time to implement strategies to overcome the conditions underlying this social problem. Sustained, consistent efforts are essential.

Summary

When these elements and conditions are present, a true sense of community emerges; one that inspires, energizes, and rewards members of the community as they resolve community issues. In all cases, this results because leaders take a positive stand. The diversification of the community is recognized and used as a strength, and the approaches are human in approach and scale. "Community" becomes redefined as more than a place, and more than the elements that divide people. It becomes the way in which people live and work together. The result is what outside observers might describe as a "mobilization of coalitions and collaboratives," but what those who live in the community simply describe as "the way we do things in our community."

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